

This action, while maintaining a significant amount of indebtedness, hardly seems to indicate that the aldermen were acting irresponsibly. Nor does it seem to indicate a sense of impending disaster. Moreover, the records of subsequent meetings of the aldermen convey a sense of routine attention to business, with no apparent irregularities or dereliction of duty.

With respect to governmental indebtedness, it is significant to note that Wilmington would not have been unique in North Carolina if it had, in fact, ultimately failed to meet its financial obligations. Writing less than two weeks after the fateful events of November 10, Republican Party Chairmen Alfred Eugene Holt observed that “the cities and towns of the state have for many years been accumulating heavy bonded indebtedness” and that “the spirit of repudiation” was abroad in the land. Citing the town of Oxford and Stanly, Wilkes, and Buncombe Counties as specific examples, he pointed out that the blame for these repudiations had, in each case, been “charged to the Republicans and Populists.”

## ***II. Was the local government corrupt?***

There is no definitive answer to the above question. All governments since time began have contained individuals who exploited the system for personal gain. Evidence of corruption sometimes can be only suspected; at other times it takes on characteristics that can be investigated and documented, such as the Credit Mobilier, Teapot Dome, and Watergate. Wilmington’s governing body in 1898 engendered no scandal near the scale of these national embarrassments; in fact, none of the allegations made against the municipal government were ever investigated by an independent body. Such general accusations as “misgovernment,” “disreputable carpetbag regime,” and “the scum of Radical Republican rule” carried no specific instances, making it impossible to determine how much, if any, of the claims were true. These were political tools of an era marked by bitter personal politics, “yellow journalism,” and a pervasive theory of Social Darwinism, the milieu in which the Wilmington Board of Aldermen were forced to function. Many sources on which historians rely in searching for the truth were tainted by the socio-political climate of the times; consequently, the question of corruption in the local government can be addressed only by comparing the charges against the relatively few known facts.

Most of the charges leveled at the Board of Aldermen for the Port City germinated in the election campaign of 1898; one of the first however, was aimed not at the board itself but at the legislature that created it. The Fusionist controlled General Assembly of 1897 had altered the Wilmington city charter to create five wards from which ten aldermen would come. Five would be elected and five appointed by the governor. The gerrymandered districts insured that African Americans would hold a majority of votes in most wards. Democrats claim that a corrupt bargain had been struck to allow blacks to fill government offices and control the city. An appeal to the State Supreme Court was rebuffed